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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the effectiveness of the Realistic Parenting Skills program, an intervention program for parents of preschoolers designed to influence children's religious education which was field tested at 7 sites in Ohio. Subjects were 37 families and their 3- to 5-year-old preschoolers. Seven group meetings were conducted for parents at each site under the leadership of experienced personnel. Data about the program were collected at the completion of the 7 group meetings held in the winter, and again at posttest in June or July. The winter data (leader and parent ratings of different aspects of the program) indicated leader and parent reactions to the program, while the summer data (parent ratings of their children on the 7 scales of Self-Regard) gave evidence of influence of the program on children. A comparison of the profiles of ratings on Self-Regard with similar profiles drawn at the conclusion of the parent meetings indicated a high percentage of increase in children's Self-Regard at posttest. In addition, data on 2 scales of Self-Regard (Purposeful Learning Skills, and Dealing with Frustrations) were compared for experimental and control groups of children with mixed results. Overall results of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the program indicate that Realistic Parenting Skills was a successful adult education program for parents. (CM)

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FIELD TESTING OF REALISTIC PARENTING SKILLS

APRRE Speech, Hartford, Connecticut
October 27-29, 1978

Lucie W. Barber

There is something quite comforting to a researcher about hard data. I do not mean to imply that clinical evidence is not important. It is. But when the clinical evidence is supported by facts and figures, then your confidence soars. We put the program, "Realistic Parenting Skills," to a rigorous test in Ohio. And it passed with flying colors. At the seven sites where parent meetings were held, the program was a success. The program was a success with group leaders, with the parents and with the children. I will report the facts and figures that support this opinion.

Our first task was to test comparability of experimental and control groups. Demographic information was gathered at the pretest. These are the variables upon which the two groups were compared by t tests: age of child; sex of child; child's attendance at church school, nursery school and kindergarten; number of children in family; family income; mother's age, education and work status; and father's age, education and work status. There were no significant t values. Furthermore, there were no significant t values when we compared experimentals and controls on the ratings on the two Scales of Self-Regard that constituted the pretest.

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In other words, the two groups were well-matched at the beginning of the field test.

Let me describe the experimental subsample where the intervention was the parenting program. This will allow you to judge whether the results might apply with the parent groups you may be in a position to influence. There were 37 families involved. 60% of the children were boys and 40% were girls. There were 3 children two years of age and one who was 5 -- the rest were either 3 or 4 years old. 40% of the children attended church school while 24% attended a nursery school. Only two of these families had but one child, the child in the sample. Most families had 2 or 3 children and 7 of the families had 4 or more children. These were experienced parents.

The information that has a bearing on socio-economic status portrays a wide range. Eight family incomes were between $10,000 and $15,000, while ten family incomes were $20,000 or above. 12 mothers and 7 fathers had only a high school education. On the other hand, 6 mothers and 6 fathers had been to graduate school. It would appear that the sample consisted of working class and professionals besides those in between.

All fathers worked full time. Ten of the mothers worked, but just parttime. Most of the parents were in their 30s but about 1/3 were in their 20s and a few were in their 40s.

Thus, if the parenting program was successful with this quite varied sample, it would seem that it has rather widespread applicability elsewhere.

I want to speak now about the seven different sites in Ohio where Realistic Parenting Skills was presented. Each diocese in the Province of Ohio was represented. Groups ranged from just three mothers at one site to seven mothers and six fathers of another site. At two sites, the seven meetings occurred over a time span of seven weeks while at other sites the time span was 10, 11 or 12 weeks. Christmas and snow storms intervened. The average attendance was 68% at one site, 90% or more at most other sites and 100% at one site. Obviously, the groups differed at the different sites.

The leaders differed, too. Four leaders were sisters with graduate degrees. At the other sites, the group leaders were lay couples without graduate degrees. One wife had only a high school education and was in her 20s. Other leaders were in their 30s or 40s, and one was in her 50s. The experience of leaders in leading groups differed. Three leaders had

10 years or more of experience, three had 5-9 years of experience but one had only 6 months or less of experience.

The groups and their leaders were very different, yet Realistic Parenting Skills was successful at each and every site.

So far I have shown you the variability in the experimental sample and the variability between groups at the different sites and between leaders at the different sites. I have also indicated to you that the field test was successful. The evidence for success will be presented but first, a few words of gratitude are in order. Those of you who are in educational research will appreciate Murphy's law to the effect that if anything can go wrong, it will. No matter how carefully an educational intervention is planned, no matter what the design for evaluation is, last minute choir rehearsals for the Christmas pageant or a flu epidemic intervenes and your whole design is in jeopardy. You do the best you can with what is left.

Certainly the atmospheric elements intervened in Ohio. We all remember the Winter of '78 as a particularly bad experience for Ohio. Yet those groups of parents completed their meetings, data was collected and amazingly, the attrition over 8 months was only 1 experimental family

and 3 control families. My interpretation of this amazing result is that John Hiltz and Sister Louise are to be applauded for the extraordinary effort they put into organizing and carrying out this field test. The Character Research Project is very grateful for their diligent cooperation.

Now, we are ready for the results. Naturally with the amount of data that was collected, the findings were so numerous as to make it impossible to report to you fully. But I will summarize. Data were collected at the completion of the seven group meetings in the winter and again at posttest in June or July. The winter data gave evidence of leader and parent reactions to the group program. The summer data gave evidence of influence of the group program on children.

We will begin with the winter data and with the leaders at the seven sites in Ohio. Leaders were asked to rate each of the seven meetings on a scale of 1 (bad) to 10 (good). The average rating for all leaders for all meetings was 8.3. Lowest ratings occurred at the site with only 3 mothers in the group and at the site where the leader lacked experience. But even at these sites, the reactions were positive.

Leaders were asked to submit written comments, both pros and cons, as constructive criticism of the program. There were 90 pro statements

contrasted with 55 con statements. These statements are invaluable when it comes time for revising the program. For example, we now know that more visual aids are necessary and that scheduling meetings around Christmas and during stormy weather is to be avoided.

On the whole, the leaders were very helpful and enthusiastic. One of the leaders wrote, "Best program I have used yet! Excellent guidelines."

It is important, of course, to provide a program about which group leaders can feel enthusiastic. However, we miss the mark unless the parents attending the meetings also feel enthusiasm. Two kinds of data from parents were gathered at the conclusion of the group meetings. We obtained ratings on 5 scales and we obtained open-ended statements about what the parents liked about the program and what they did not like about the program.

Each of the five scales was scored from 1 to 9. A score of one was given to the most negative response, a score of five was given to the neutral response, a score of nine to the most positive response

and intermediate scores were assigned appropriately.

The first scale was EFFECTIVENESS of Realistic Parenting Skills for your family. The mean score was 6.15. The parenting skills were working effectively in the homes of the families. The second scale was your UNDERSTANDING of Developmental levels for your child. Here the mean was 6.90. Understanding had improved. Your RELATIONSHIP with your child was the third scale. The mean was 6.45. Relationships were better. The fourth scale was your feeling that you CAN HELP your child develop Self-Regard. The mean was 7.60. Parents were fairly confident they could help their child. Your REACTION to the Group Program you have just completed was the final scale. The mean was 7.50. Parents enjoyed the group program.

These are excellent results for a field test of a new program. We did find some differences between mothers and fathers and between sites. Mothers were somewhat more positive than fathers. Some sites were more positive than other sites. But, generally speaking, the program was viewed positively by both parents, at all sites.

The method of Content Analysis was employed with the open-ended comments. 56% of the parents wrote of their appreciation for being able to talk and share with other parents. 31% of the parents testified that they had become more aware of their unique child. 25% of the parents wrote that the program had been reassuring to them that their child's problems were normal and 25% wrote their appreciation for learning how to help their child. Learning about child development appealed to 17% of the parents.

What was it that parents did not like about the parenting skills program? 35% of the parents did not write anything in the space provided. The most frequent criticism but still coming from only 26% of the parents concerned the tapes. We had not had a professional narrator when we made the tapes for the field test and we expected criticism. There were objections to some of the Scales of Self-Regard and to some of the examples and there were parents asking for visual aids, but these were from small numbers of parents. Many of the con statements did not criticize the program itself. For example, "I would like titles of books on child development," and "The winter weather was a problem," and "could have had more people participate."

We found some differences between mothers and fathers on what they they liked and did not like. And we found some differences between the groups at the various sites. But, overall, we again found positive reactions from both mothers and fathers and from parents at each and every site.

The report of results that CRP sent to Toledo was 70 pages long. Thus, as you can imagine, I have only reported some of the results to you here. But essentially you have heard the basic result that Realistic Parenting Skills was well received in Ohio by both leaders and parents.

Most program evaluation would end right here. We had established that an adult education program was successful with adults. It was successful with different leaders with 7 different parent groups and with parents at many socio-economic levels. But the whole purpose for the adult education was to influence the foundational religious education of the little children in their homes. Did the experimental children grow in Self-Regard?

At the conclusion of the field test, parents drew Profiles of ratings on the seven Scales of Self-Regard. We compared these Profiles to

their Profiles drawn at the conclusion of the seven parent meetings. The time between these two Profiles was six or seven months. During this span of time 97% of the children received a higher rating on at least one of the seven Scales. 58% of the children received a higher rating on four or more of the Scales. Only one child, a 5 year old boy did not make progress in any of the seven components of Self-Regard, at least as perceived by his mother.

Females were compared to males for total Self-Regard scores. The t value was significant at the .10 level favoring the girls. Two and three year old children were compared to four and five year old children. The t value was significant at the .05 level favoring the younger children.

Profiles come in all shapes and sizes supporting the concept of uniqueness of each individual child. Roughly one-half of the sample made progress on any single Scale. In other words, children progress in differing patterns and no Scale stands out as more "popular" than others.

Thus we know that the experimental children were growing in Self-Regard. But the Scales are developmental and growth can be

expected just because of maturation over seven months. Did experimental children grow more than control children?

We had the data from both groups for two Scales of Self-Regard: Purposeful Learning of Skills and Dealing With Frustrations. We attacked the question in two different ways. First, we compared Experimentals' mean scores pretest with mean scores posttest. And we compared Controls' mean scores pretest with mean scores posttest. This was not a direct comparison of experimentals with controls because the two groups at pretest were not starting at exactly the same level. But we can compare the one tailed probability levels of the t values. Comparisons were made in each case for 2 and 3 year old children seperately from 4 and 5 year old children. The probability level for 2 and 3 year olds on Purposeful Learning of Skills favoring posttest means was .01 for experimentals and .45 for controls. Experimentals' gains very probably did not occur by chance while Controls' gains had a high likelihood of being a chance occurrence. On the Scale, Dealing With Frustrations, for 2 and 3 year olds, the probability level was .05 for experimentals and .50 for controls. The results for 4 and 5 year olds on the two Scales were a .10 and a .07 probability level

for experimentals and a .30 and a .25 level for controls. In all cases, gains made by experimentals were much less likely to have occurred by chance and gains made by controls certainly could have occurred by chance.

The second method of answering the question, "Did experimental children grow more than control children?," involved a direct comparison of the two groups. In order to do this, we dealt with change scores. Change scores quantify amount of growth from pretest to posttest. In the first approach dealing with means of scores or achievement levels pretest and posttest, we could not compare experimentals with controls directly because achievement levels pretest were different. We wipe out that difficulty with change score means because it does not matter at what level children started at pretest.

The results were somewhat surprising although not unexpected. For the 2 and 3 year olds, the results were in the expected direction favoring the experimentals over the controls. For Purposeful Learning of Skills, the one-tailed probability level for the t value was better than .05. For Dealing With Frustrations, the probability level was better than .005.

Two-tailed probability levels will be reported for the 4 and 5 year olds because the results were not in the expected directions. The means for change scores for the controls were slightly higher than for the experimentals but these are not significant; the differences could have happened by chance. The two probability levels were .30 and .90.

These findings certainly have implications for the Realistic Parenting Skills program. There appears to be a more immediate effect on children when the participating parents have 2 and 3 year old children. This is not to say that parents of older children will not benefit from the parenting program. It may just take longer for parents to see results in child behavior. Four and five year old children may not be as flexible as younger preschoolers, which is another way of saying that the younger education can begin, the better.

There you have the hard data -- the facts and figures -- for the evaluation of the Realistic Parenting Skills program field tested in Ohio. We can say with confidence that we have a successful parenting program because we have the research evidence to support that claim. Religious education is in need of more research of the type I've

described. It will help us know where we are going in our different programs of ministry and then help us determine if we, in fact, achieve our goals or not. We did achieve our goals with the Realistic Parenting Skills program.

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